

Title: Interview with Ronnie ‘Bam’ Pruitt

Date: April 13, 2025

Location: Ronnie ‘Bam’ Pruitt’s house in Crisfield

Interviewer(s): Paige Cohen and Sam Gundlach

Interviewee: Ronnie ‘Bam’ Pruitt

Introduction: Ronnie ‘Bam’ Pruitt talks about his time living in Crisfield, working at his aunt's pizza place when he was young, and working with local fishermen on the docks. He talks about his views on how the city, county and federal governments have been handling Crisfield's issues throughout the years.

[Transcription begins]

Paige Cohen (Cohen): Alright, so my name is Paige.

Ronnie 'Bam' Pruitt (Pruitt): I'm Ronnie.

Sam Gundlach (Gundlach): My name is Sam.

Pruitt: Nice to meet you guys.

Gundlach: Nice to meet you.

Cohen: And we're at Ronnie's house doing a recording on April 13th, 2025, at 4:15. So our first question is just- just some background information. So how long have you lived in the Crisfield area and since you were born here, what's it's been like?

Pruitt: Well, I'm- I've been here 33 years, almost 34, as if, you know, it's and Crisfield is a little small town, it's not much of the big seafood population here, you know, the- that the Chesapeake Bay right over there, we're right on that. Lot of seafood is basically what keeps the economy going around here, basically, you know, like, that's our main thing here, it's about as good as it used to be, it's got worse over the years. Not quite sure what that's all about, why that's happening, but, trying to think of what else.

Cohen: What's it been like raising a kid in Crisfield?

Pruitt: It's fun, it's alright, that's the one thing I wish Crisfield had was more stuff for, you know, kids, things for kids to do around here, you know. There's no movie theaters or parks and you got

a little park, but they don't even got jungle gyms out there anymore. I don't know, I just wish we had something for kids around here to do.

Gundlach: Okay, what is or are some of your most cherished memories of Crisfield? [pauses]

Pruitt: Most cherished memories of Crisfield? Man, I'm not even sure.

Cohen: It could be anything related to just your everyday life, something about, you know, tourism or fishing or recreation, anything.

Pruitt: I guess- I guess the cool thing would be just everyone knows each other around here, you know, it's only like 2,000 people or something in this town, you know, everybody kind of knows each other somewhat. So most people, it's quiet around here, you know, it's not a lot of stuff going on. So that's cool. I like that. It's quiet. You know, it's a big city. So I like that, I like small town thing, personally, it just what I- what I like, you know.

Cohen: So, how do you like to entertain yourself in Crisfield? Are there any community events or place you like go?

Pruitt: We've got a bunch of churches around here. We need to start going back to church, that's what we should do. But for fun, I don't really, I just hang out at home. You know, I got- I got my daughter, got a son. You know just, I work and come home and hang out basically, you know, there's not really much to do down here anyway.

Cohen: What role does the waterfront or the Chesapeake Bay play in recreation and social life?

Pruitt: A lot- a lot. especially for the older generation, I think it's not as important to the younger generation but the older folks, you know, they all every morning they're up four o'clock in the morning hanging out at some of these little local coffee shops and stuff talking before to go out, you know. So it does- it does bring about a lot of people together when it comes to the older folks, for sure.

Gundlach: Have you noticed changes in the land, weather, water, or flooding in Crisfield? And if so, how have these changes affected your daily life?

Pruitt: I've seen changes just in like the condos and stuff like that like more tourism over the years, but that's really about it, you know. Like it's almost turning into like a tourism spot almost Crisfield is for like, I guess, older folks that I guess to retire just want to come hang out by the bay, you know?

Cohen: Do you- do have to personally prepare for flooding or severe storms that impact your- which may impact your ability to go to work?

Pruitt: Hurricanes. Yeah, for sure, if there's hurricanes, there's been hurricanes where I've seen the water up on the highway here like a couple feet high of water. It's like literally a current going through the highway, like it was, it was crazy, but that's like typically just hurricane stuff. Like if there was a high tide we'll get some flooding, but it's not typically not too bad for, you know, being right next to the bay. It not- not real bad, but you just high tide you will see a little bit of water on the road.

Cohen: Do you have any challenges getting around in more common flooding?

Pruitt: Not really, no. It's just it's some of the other roads down- down in the woods or whatever they like to call them there. they get flooded a little worse than right here in town do, but that's- that's it really.

Cohen: Do others in the community prepare, do you think they prepare more or less than you and how- how do they prepare, have you noticed?

Pruitt: Well, they definitely prepare. Every time there's- every time there's like hurricane warnings and all that stuff, like our Food Lion down here, like good luck going in there during that, you know? It's the whole place is filled up and so people definitely prepare for stuff down here for sure.

Gundlach: Are there any storms or flooding events that you remember most vividly?

Pruitt: Katrina, I think that was early 2000s. I was really young then. There was a recent one like ten years ago maybe, what was that one called? Sandy? No, Sandy and Katrina. I think Sandy was the early 2000's, I think, and then Katrina might have been 2010's, but yeah, those are crazy just, you know, the whole highway is filled up with water right here. Pretty wild stuff. We had to get- I was staying at one of my friend's house one night and we had to get rescued and taken to Princess Anne, stayed at a school up there. That was Katrina, I believe, or Sandy. It was one of those two. I get them mixed up because they were both really bad. [Hurricane Sandy was in 2012 and Hurricane Katrina was in 2005.]

Gundlach: How did you get rescued? Was it by boat?

Pruitt: No, they should have brought a boat, but uh, no, it was like a- what was it? It was like a SWAT or something. Almost like a SWAT team. They had a big truck. You know, they drove it right through the water and we swam across the highway to our, the- the guy came and swam across to us and then we swam back to his truck and that's how we basically got rescued. It's pretty- pretty crazy down here during those events, those hurricanes and stuff.

Cohen: Yeah, I've heard. How have you participated in any community events surrounding the issue of flooding?

Pruitt: I don't, I'm not sure if we have any events for that, but I could be wrong though. I am not too sure.

Cohen: Okay, then we can move on to the next question. Have you or anyone you know had to move or make major repairs to your home because of flooding or rising water lines?

Pruitt: Lot of people around here, if you- if you ride around town, you'll see how they're building houses like seven, eight feet off the ground. It's just nothing but like cinder blocks stacked up that's like six, seven feet high and then they start building a house on top of that. So just because the flooding and stuff from the hurricanes that ruined people's floors and, you know, they did a lot of damage to people's houses, I've had a couple of my friends and grandparent's houses get torn up. Nothing really to my- to my family or nothing though, but I've had some friends that definitely had some damages.

Cohen: What resources have you noticed people lean on when they're dealing with damage? Is there anyone in the community that really comes and helps?

Pruitt: There's, we got a- I'm not sure what it's called, but they basically get to hand out food and stuff to people, basically free food. I'm not sure what the organization is called though, but there, they, we do have a lot of that going on around here. Still, like, even if there ain't no emergencies or nothing, they still do that.

Cohen: Do you think the younger generations, because of all this flooding, do you think that they're likely to stay or move?

Pruitt: Probably if they had the choice, they were able to, they'd probably move, but I mean I would guess that be my if they have the ability to just go anywhere, they wanted to they would probably leave here for sure.

Gundlach: Do you see yourself sticking around or moving in the future?

Pruitt: I probably will stay. I'll probably be here. Unless something, you know, crazy happens and I have to leave or something, but I don't see myself leaving anytime soon. I like the small town, you know, it's perfect for me, I can just come home and it's quiet all the time.

Cohen: It is a really wonderful town.

Pruitt: Yeah, yeah, that's- I- I like the quietness, man. That's what I like.

Gundlach: A lot of people have said that they like the- the quiet and the peace.

Pruitt: Yeah, it's just a lot of that around here. Not much goes on.

Cohen: The natural beauty of it all is there's so much here.

Pruitt: Yeah, yeah.

Cohen: How has the local economy, particularly industries like fishing, crabbing, and tourism, changed over the years?

Pruitt: Seafood's gotten worse over the years. I don't know if that's from laws or whatever the case may be. Just fishery and crab, it's gotten worse, oystering has too. Tourism is probably going up though, I would imagine. I'm not sure what's going on with the seafood though. I don't, I think they got a lot of bad laws and they should listen to the fishermen more. I think that they know more than the people that are, you know, enforcing the laws and stuff or creating the laws or whatever. I don't- I don't think they listened to the watermen enough.

Cohen: Yeah, absolutely.

Pruitt: And don't get me wrong, there's some bad watermen out there too, but there's a lot of them guys know what they're doing and what they are talking about.

Cohen: Now, what do you do for work and has it really changed because of flooding or- or any other reasons?

Pruitt: I've had a couple jobs. My first job was right over here at the pizza- pizza shop and I worked there, see my aunt owns that. And I worked there for a few months, like a- in high school. But I've always worked in seafood on the boat or on a crab dock where the buyer buys the crabs and stuff from the fishermen. So I've done that for like, I did that for 9 years and now what I do is I basically work with a gill netter and he- he fishes and stuff and we hang gill nets for him and a lot of watermen around here and over the Bay Bridge, he sells a lot and nets to those guys too. All up and down the East Coast really, it's kind of crazy that that one dude's got like all that kind of business, you know? I don't think a lot of people hang gill nets anymore. So that's probably why.

Gundlach: How are the businesses in Crisfield doing? And how is the future of those businesses looking?

Pruitt: Well, we got a lot of, like, restaurant stuff, and they seem to come and go a lot. You know, they stick around for a few years, and, they close, and then someone opens up a different one there, but it's always, you know, that's basically what we got, is restaurants. For the most part, like there's not too much business here besides the seafood and tourism, I think, actually.

Cohen: Are there any projects regarding Crisfield's local economy that are exciting you or concerning you?

Pruitt: I don't, I vote down here, but I don't really know what's going on down here at all when it comes to that stuff. You know, I don't, I'm not sure what their plans are or what they're doing. I have no idea. I'm sorry. I- I don't know.

Cohen: We want- we want whatever information you have.

Pruitt: I've always wondered, I was like, I don't know why I don't see these mayors and stuff like going out here and trying to talk to people. They don't, they never talked to me before, you know, so I don't know what they're doing. If I was running for mayor, I'd be out here trying to talk to the people though, you know, that's what I would do.

Cohen: Now do you have any opinions on how the city council or state have handled flooding issues in Crisfield?

Pruitt: I don't- I don't know what you can do about it honestly. I don't know if it's just a thing that gets worse over time from erosion or I don't know they got seawalls around Tangier where it's basically, they have like big rocks like, they would go around the whole island over here, there're huge rocks, and I don't know if that's supposed to stop like erosion from the beaches and stuff. I'm not sure but they seem like it they act like it works so maybe they could do something like that but I don't honestly, I don't know. It's always just flooded down. I think it's just natural. We're right on the bay and stuff, so I think it's just going to happen.

Gundlach: Do you feel that your voice and the voices of the other citizens in Crisfield are being heard by the government?

Pruitt: Crisfield, like Crisfield government? Probably not, no. I- I feel like they don't treat the watermen fair honestly, you know, I think they actually there's bad ones, but there are some good ones that really do know what they're talking about, you know, and I feel like they're more informed than those guys are and I think I should listen to some of those good watermen. Sometimes, you know, cause there is bad ones and the bad ones, bad people and everything, but a lot of good watermen around here.

Cohen: Do you feel similarly about the county and state government, about the, like, listening and everything?

Pruitt: Maryland, when it comes to, I'm not sure what because I haven't messed with crabs in a while, just been doing like fish. Our Maryland laws are way worse than Virginia's laws are, like they could just- their laws are just way better for Virginia guys where they can leave their nets overboard overnight and like in Maryland, you have to set them and then pick them up before you go in. So it's like it's a lot of work to do in one day. You know what I'm saying? It's- it's just Virginia's laws are way better than ours. So I don't think they're listening to us.

Cohen: Now we're getting down to the last couple of questions here, but this is one. Would you recommend Crisfield as a place to live?

Pruitt: Yeah. Especially if you just want, you know, you just like quiet places. You got a nice view. We got nice sunsets, nice sunrises. You've got the water here. I mean, there's a lot of stuff here for people, especially older folks for sure, yeah. Young people now, probably not, you guys might want to go somewhere else. You're gonna be bored down here.

Cohen: Since you've lived here for your entire life, love to know what- what time in the past was the best time to move to Crisfield you think? Or do you think it could be now?

Pruitt: Mmm, best time to move to Crisfield. I would say that probably 10, 10, 12, 15 years ago around in that range, because our seafood market was doing really good then. So I mean, that's our main thing right there is our seafood, you know? So it's gotten worse over the years. So if you go back 10, 15, years, it was way better than it is now. If you go 20 years before then it's, you know, double what it was then. So it just progressively gotten worse and worse. But yeah, I would say 15, 15 years ago probably was a good time to come move to Crisfield. They started bringing up the condos and stuff around that time too, you know. We've got a bunch of condos down here; I think we've got five or six of them.

Gundlach: Are you hopeful for the future of Crisfield, and where would you like to see it heading in the next 20 years?

Pruitt: I'm hopeful. I think Crisfield's got a lot of opportunity and a lot of things that they can do for the good for the people here and for the seafood, the sea-market. I think there's a lot of optimism for people, I think. Yeah.

Cohen: The last question we have is what- what wisdom do you have to share with future generations?

Pruitt: If you have a small business, because this is a problem that we're having here and on Tangier and Smith Island, is like the watermen, you know, they have these nice expensive boats and all this gear, but their kids don't want to, they want to do something else, you know? They want to go off to college or do other things. I think a lot of kids should follow what their parents are doing, if stuff like that, you know? Cause they'd make a lot of money doing that stuff, going out there and catching crabs and fish and stuff. They still make a bunch of money and it's a great living.

Cohen: Well, thank you so much. Do you have any last thoughts before we end?

Pruitt: Oh. Nah, I think that's alright, I'm not sure.

Cohen: Well, thank you so much.

Pruitt: No problem, no problem.

[Transcript ends]